

Enhancement of musical education through the inclusion of Chinese Ziyang folk songs in school curriculum

Zhaomin Yang¹ 
Sayam Chuangprakhon² 
Weerayut Seekhunlio³ 




^{1,2,3}College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.
¹Email: 63012061024@msu.ac.th
²Email: sayam.c@msu.ac.th
³Email: weerayut.s@msu.ac.th

Abstract

This study examines the impact of integrating Ziyang folk songs into the school music curriculum on students' musical skills and cultural appreciation. It aims to explore how traditional music can enhance student engagement, emotional intelligence, and cognitive abilities while promoting cultural preservation. A qualitative research methodology focused on three key informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to identify key trends in teaching adaptations, student responses, and cultural outcomes. The study revealed that incorporating Ziyang folk songs into music education significantly increased student engagement, cultural pride, and emotional investment. Students demonstrated improved musical skills, including vocal techniques and an enhanced understanding of folk music structures. These findings align with culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing the role of local traditions in enriching the learning experience. Integrating Ziyang folk songs into school curricula provides a balanced educational model that fosters technical proficiency and cultural immersion. However, limited resources and insufficient teacher training highlight the need for policy support and innovative teaching strategies. The study underscores the importance of including indigenous music in education to preserve intangible cultural heritage. It recommends further research on comparative regional studies, teacher training programs, and digital platforms to expand accessibility and sustainability.

Keywords: Cultural preservation, Music education, Shaanxi Province, Student engagement, Ziyang folk songs, Chinese folk songs.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study uniquely explores the integration of Ziyang folk songs into school curricula, highlighting their impact on student engagement, musical skills, and cultural appreciation. Unlike previous research, it provides qualitative insights from educators, emphasizing culturally responsive pedagogy and proposing policy-driven solutions for sustaining traditional music education in modern classrooms.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, music education has been a cornerstone of school curricula, with an emphasis on building technical skills and comprehension of musical theory. Yet the implications of music education are much deeper than that; it's a striking vehicle for the transfer of culture and identity formation (Reimer, 2022; Sanchez-Escribano, Gertrudix, & Bautista, 2024; Westerlund et al., 2022). This task is especially important in areas with a rich cultural heritage like Shaanxi Province in China, where local folk songs reflect the historical and cultural spirit of the local community. Focusing on the Ankang Ziyang folk songs, a traditional music from Ankang in Shaanxi Province, this study aims to develop the integration of this traditional music into the curriculum of school music education and examine its effect on students' cultural awareness and musical literacy. Ziyang folk songs are more than tunes; they are the storytellers of the local history, traditions, and the way of life of the Ankang people. Those songs are soundscape tours of the time, displaying the different cultural backgrounds of the area (Beibei, 2024; Jiayang Li & Su, 2024; Qiaoyi, 2024). Although their contribution to our culture is great, folk songs are not given great attention in formal schools and the education system, motivating this research to investigate. The emphasis on indigenous folk songs from Ziyang informs a broader exploration into how this process contributes to a more multi-faceted musical education in mainstream professional contexts, so that students become accustomed to a musical environment closer to home (Guan, Luo, & Matsunobu, 2023; Wang & Webb, 2024; Zou, Hin-on, & Sapaso, 2024). This research is fundamentally focused on the lack of integration of local culture in the school curriculum, which is part of the larger problem in education across the world. This omission leads to a one-size-fits-all education that disregards the vast diversity of students' life experiences. For Ankang students, Fuzheng Folk Song certainly doesn't feature in the curriculum. The interdependence between curriculum, education, and local cultural expression underlines the importance of this focus on an inclusive approach in teaching, with details of how it can be achieved through a locally specific curriculum (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2024; Sakti, Endraswara, & Rohman, 2024). In summary, this implies the meaningfulness of this study to determine the impact on educational policy and practice, as well as indirectly provide evidence to support the Ziyang folk songs as more ethnolinguistic music in the education system. In doing so, it aims to strengthen students' engagement with and appreciation of local culture while also helping to preserve culture. The results may ignite alteration, prompting decision-makers in music education to reinvestigate and possibly reconfigure music education policies with a more diverse and wider range of representation (Li & Seekhunlio, 2024; Wang, Chuangprakhon, Jian, & Wang, 2024). In addition, the findings of the study have implications beyond Ankang, as the results could be utilized in other areas steeped in cultural traditions, thereby contributing to a broader discussion of cultural education and its potential to create diverse and inclusive learning spaces.

1.1. Research Objective

To examine the effect of teaching Ziyang folk songs in the school music curriculum on students' musical skills and appreciation of local culture.

1.2. Research Question

What are the impacts of music education, centering on Ziyang folk songs, on students' engagement and related knowledge of their musical and cultural heritage?

2. Literature Review

Recent years have seen a growing interest in securing the integration of traditional music into educational systems with the aim of developing students emotionally, cognitively, and culturally. One such segment of music, Folk music, acts as a bridge between the cultural roots of society and the education provided in a contemporary setup. It facilitates both a connection for students to their own roots, along with making their learning experience even better. This is reflected in the Ziyang folk songs, which have profound historical and artistic connotations, and are an important cultural treasure in Ziyang and even in the Shaanxi local culture. Although there has been an increasing amount of research on regular music in education, the unique contributions of Ziyang folk songs have rarely been discussed. This review emphasizes the importance of the value of Ziyang folk songs used in educational curricula from three main aspects, namely emotional development, cognitive enhancement, and cultural preservation.

2.1. Emotional Development and Expression

Music has always been a very strong medium, and folk songs are the best examples of expressively engaging an audience. Ziyang folk songs, with their evocative melodies and themes inspired by daily life, give students an emotional connection to their cultural heritage. Songs like these often tell stories of love and struggle, teaching students a range of emotions while building empathy and understanding. The unstructured and improvisational character of many Ziyang folk songs encourages subjective interpretation and thus facilitates an authentic experience of students' feelings (Healy & Ankney, 2020; Picado, Pereira, & Castilho, 2022; Yao, Sensai, & Junkate, 2023). Just think about how much this practice is going to help students improve their emotional IQ in understanding their own and other people's feelings through music. These folk songs are what people learn and sing in Ziyang, and learning to perform them encourages expression, excitement, and a feeling of achievement. These benefits of emotion apply not only to the music classroom but also aid students in their emotional development while navigating a social context (Deaner, 2023; Smith, 2021).

2.2. Cognitive Enhancement Through Musical Analysis

Cognitive Enrichment: Ziyang folk songs are a traditional style of music, exposing students to different musical elements (i.e., scales, rhythms, modes) not heard in other styles of music. Critical thinking and cognitive skills are

engaged with these songs, which makes them appropriate for beginners and also accessible to advanced learners. The process of learning Ziyang folk songs stimulates not only memory and attention (Luo & Saihong, 2023; Okan & Usta, 2021; Oztutgan, 2020), which are important cognitive abilities, but also memorization, pattern recognition, and creative problem-solving. By sharing commentary through a call-and-response format, active listening and collaboration are encouraged, leading to even higher levels of intellectual engagement. Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of Ziyang folk songs and the cognitive development from combining that musical study with history, sociology, geography, and other subjects may help students appreciate those other fields of study and their connection to music more (Eminjanovna, 2021; Wen, Zhang, & Wang, 2024).

2.3. Cultural Conservation and Identity Construction

Ziyang folk songs, as living archives of a community's history, values, and traditions, must be incorporated into school curricula for cultural preservation. They sing away their cares and woes, learn, and perform these songs that foster pride and a sense of belonging, solidifying their cultural identity in a globalizing world. This also works against the decline of region-specific cultures as the youth are exposed to the rest of the world. Folk music not only facilitates the process of building social cohesion and mutual understanding on which traditional societies are based, but it also encourages the communal nature of folk music, promoting social cohesion and mutual understanding among students. The introduction of Ziyang folk songs in the classroom is not only a platform for the integration of school and local community, but it also allows students to have a real understanding of Ziyang folk music's history and skills. These initiatives enhance the educational experience of students and contribute to the endurance of cultural practices (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Zeng & Onlamul, 2023; Zhang & Wu, 2023).

The inclusion of Ziyang folk songs into the school curriculum is a comprehensive educational model that promotes emotional cultivation, cognitive development, and cultural inheritance. These songs combine artistic and educational value, making them a perfect medium to enrich musical education. Through learning and practicing Ziyang folk songs, students not only get to know more about their root culture, but also develop crucial abilities and a long-term interest in great and diversified Chinese traditional music. The review reveals the feasibility of Ziyang folk songs in enriching the music education experience, embedding it to tune holistic education.

3. Research Methodology

The research used a qualitative research method to investigate the integration of Ziyang folk songs into the school music curriculum. To this end, the methodology examined how music teachers adjusted their pedagogical practices, the challenges they encountered, and the benefits they observed in students' musical and cultural growth. Using in-depth interviews, data were collected from seasoned music teachers and analyzed thematically for definite patterns and themes (Bresler, 2021; Jones, 2023; Qiu, Chuangprakhon, & Jian, 2024).

3.1. Key Informants

This study included three key informants, three music educators working in middle schools in Ankang, Shaanxi Province. Their unique perspectives yielded rich data regarding how the implementation process unfolded and the ways it influenced students associated with these labs.

3.2. Data Collection

Using semi-structured interviews as the qualitative method, this study collected opinions on the integration of Ziyang folk songs into schools. Interviews focused on adapting esoteric teaching methodologies, witnessing changes in student engagement and cultural appreciation, identifying inhibitors, and offering solutions for implementing impactful integration. The setting of the interviews was informal, with each lasting around an hour. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data was systematically analyzed, identifying patterns and themes in line with the objectives of the research. We read through the transcripts multiple times, coded for recurrent ideas (the coding process was inductive), and then grouped those codes into broader themes such as "pedagogical adjustments," "student engagement," and "cultural significance." Thematic analysis was used to understand the implications of Ziyang folk songs being integrated into a music education context. Interview transcripts were read to become familiar with the data, then codes were assigned to the data, followed by grouping together similar codes, looking for notable patterns, and interpreting themes in the context of research objectives.

3.4. Research Steps

Table 1 summarizes the process of research conducted, which applied rigorous methods to safeguard the validity and reliability of it.

Table 1. Research steps.

Phase	Activity	Objective
Preparation	Develop tools and identify participants	Ensure relevance and focus of data collection
Data collection	Conduct interviews and transcriptions	Obtain in-depth qualitative data
Data analysis	Code, categorize, and identify themes	Derive meaningful insights from raw data
Reporting	Synthesize findings into actionable recommendations	Provide guidance for stakeholders

This methodological framework ensured a comprehensive understanding of the educational and cultural significance of integrating Ziyang folk songs into school curricula, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers.

4. Results

The inclusion of Ziyang folk songs in school music curricula produced impressive results, showing that traditional music played an important role in students' education. The results represent major progress in student

engagement, cultural appreciation, and musical skill development. Through incorporating elements of local culture into the curriculum, educators were able to generate an engaging and relevant learning atmosphere that connected with students both emotionally and intellectually. We chronicle these results in the next sections, emphasizing the importance of matching the educational content with the cultural legacy.

4.1. Enhanced Engagement

The incorporation of Ziyang folk songs into music education resulted in substantial increases in student participation and enthusiasm in the classroom. Interviews with the three key informants, experienced music teachers who led this integration, also revealed the significant change in students' attitudes towards music classes. One teacher said, "The students seemed a little more present and a little more connected to the music. They wanted to learn, listened, engaged, and sang when the content reflected their cultural identity."

This lays firmly on the fact that learning about their ethnicity is naturally alluring to students and thus accounts for students being more participative in lessons with Ziyang folk songs. This enthusiasm in practice (see Figure 1), which depicts a music teacher and a group of engaged students. The teacher noticed that students, who previously seemed glazed over during generic Western composers' lessons, lit up and started asking questions when they were presented with Ziyang folk songs. They asked questions about the origin of the songs, requested advice about performance techniques, and even tried to imitate the vocal styles shown by the teacher.



Figure 1. The teacher instructs students who are passionate about Ziyang folk songs.

The study itself demonstrated a notable increase in classroom engagement metrics. They were also more likely to volunteer to perform in front of the class, to lead small group activities, and to contribute to creative group projects. Especially when performing folk songs in their own styles, they showed greater focus and excitement. One student even wrote a short melody based on the piece "Tiger Descending the Mountain" (see Figure 2), which illustrates the engagement that can spark innovation.



Figure 2. The Ziyang folk song "Tiger Descending the Mountain".

Ziyang folk songs also promoted a collaborative learning atmosphere. Teachers noted that students began to form small peer groups to work on singing techniques or on lyrical themes from the folk songs. These activities were collective in nature, displaying the social origins of the Ziyang folk tradition, where music and dance were historically times of unification.

Figure 3 captures the energy of these class experiences through a performance by a student group led by a music teacher. This model of participatory learning, with its underlying and deeply connected framework of cultural exploration, increased engagement, nurtured students' pride in their musical heritage, and sense of ownership. Their presentation reflects their involvement just as much as the enthusiasm reflected in the interviews of their teachers.



Figure 3. The inheritor instructs students about Ziyang folk songs.

Overall, the success of including folk songs in music education guidelines provided culturally relevant contexts that were relatable to students, thereby resulting in lessons that were more rewarding and exciting. Such engagement enhanced the educational experience and fostered a renewed connection between students and the local culture.

4.2. Cultural Appreciation

Integrating Ziyang folk songs into music education not only enhanced students' cultural understanding, but it also linked their personal backgrounds with music education. The use of traditional songs provided students with the opportunity to explore the cultural roots of their community, as music teachers indicated as key informants. One teacher said, "The students were not merely learning how to play music; they were rediscovering their identity. These students had started asking about the songs' origins, the traditions associated with them, and the stories they contained."

Ziyang folk songs, with their evocative melodies and historically rich lyrics, allow my students to connect with the traditions of Ankang, Shaanxi Province through a cultural lens. Illustrated in Figure 2, students listen closely as a teacher uses a folk song to illustrate the historical context of a topic, and the growing curiosity represented in the image captures this increasing interest and appreciation well. The teacher said that the conversations around the songs often rippled out into discussions about the region's history, the lives of their ancestors, and their community embedded in customs.

It also showed that students reflected their understanding of other cultures in high regard, not only in classes but also through their manner and behavior. Some students felt this gave them pride, being able to perform these songs and lead others in songs to remind us where we come from. One music teacher, for example, reported a student who performed the class work in honor of their grandparents, recognizing the elders as a source of local traditions. Those moments reinforced how music education was layered with personal narratives and cultural learning.

Thematic interpretation of qualitative data revealed a reversal of students' meaning-making of cultural capital. At first, most students thought folk songs were old-fashioned or irrelevant. That all changed, though, when they heard the music, sang it, and understood what it meant culturally. Describing how students regularly contacted friends to talk about folk traditions and proudly shared their research with family, teachers noted that students often sought to further explore folk traditions as well. Such behaviors illustrated how music education fostered cultural appreciation and served as a channel for cross-generational dialogue.

The informants highlighted how experiential learning played a key role in the process. Through activities such as field visits to local music festivals and the invitation of folk song practitioners to perform and teach, students could take part in their living cultural heritage. Figure 3 is a session where students learned directly from a practitioner of folk song. Such interactions deepened students' understanding of the lived experience behind the music.

In summary, Ziyang folk songs in music education had a great improvement in students' cultural appreciation. Through a mixture of performance, discussion, and contextual exploration, the students not only learned the technicalities of the songs but also developed a deep appreciation for the culture from which those songs emerged. The integration of music education into other subjects served to reinforce its role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

4.3. Musical Skills

The results showcase how the incorporation of traditional Ziyang folk songs within music education played a significant role in improving the musical abilities of students, particularly in their comprehension and performance of traditional folk music. Students sang and played songs, developed technical mastery, and improved their vocal and instrumental practices. They explored the texture, tone, structure, and dynamics of musical genres through active musical engagement.

Teachers of music noted that the introduction of Ziyang folk songs encouraged students to broaden their musical repertoire and flexibility. "One of them was folk songs such as 'Tiger Descending the Mountain,' which involved students utilizing a wider vocal range to implement subtle expressive qualities in their singing," one teacher said. This moved them beyond the more elementary melodies found in most standard curricula. Students learned to control pitch and tone quality with traditional Ziyang folk music singing techniques, including local singing, falsetto, and sliding tones.

Figures 1 and 3 illustrate this progression as students practice under the tutelage of experienced music educators and folk practitioners. It was evident through students' learning of the distinct rhythmic and melodic characteristics of Ziyang folk songs. These sessions underscored how repetition and improvisation, both central to folk music, had nurtured their capacity to interpret and personalize a performance. A teacher said that students who had difficulty with these concepts quickly adapted and were soon able to interpret complex pieces.

Interviews with music educators were thematically analyzed and showed that learning folk songs facilitated an integrated approach to musical instruction. Students had to mimic melodies and grasp all the cultural context and

emotional subtleties of the songs. It helped connect technical ability and emotional range, as one informant described it, factors often neglected by formal music education systems.

Additionally, students learned from one another in peer-to-peer learning as they analyzed and performed Ziyang folk songs. Such collective effort empowered their ensemble performance ability through in-class recitals and community exhibitions. Music teachers noticed that the students were in better synchronization with each other and harmonized better, so they truly believed that there were some educational benefits to including folk music in their lives.

Another significant result was the extension of musical skills outside of the classroom. The students who participated in the local cultural festivals demonstrated their adaptability, bringing traditional techniques alive within many different performance situations. “Performing Ziyang folk songs in public raised the confidence of students,” one informant mentioned. They figured out how to articulate to a general public the essence of the music, a sign of a more nuanced understanding of musical expression. The data also showed that folk song engagement helped students read music better. Through the melodies and colorful tunes of folk music, students learned about the unique modes and Zhiliel (irregular rhythmic patterns) found in Chinese traditional music theory. Teachers also observed that this theoretical background enhanced students’ skills in analyzing and appreciating other genres of music, demonstrating the transferable nature of skills developed through this program.

Overall, this study highlights the significance of incorporating Ziyang folk songs into music education as a means to enhance students’ performance abilities and as a platform for the cultivation of integrative musical understanding. The association of learning music and living with people from a completely different culture, while honing skills that would be applied in real situations, highlighted how critical it is to factor traditional music into the educational process. In this way of teaching, students became less like apprentice performers and more like informed appreciators of their cultural heritage, to the point where music became much more to them than just getting the notes right.

Three main impacts or their interrelations emerging from integrating Ziyang folk songs are diagrammed in Figure 4: musical skills, cultural appreciation, and engagement. These three outcomes work interdependently to realize the breadth and richness of the educational experience. Enhanced engagement, represented on the right, indicates degrees of student participation and enthusiasm, particularly when local cultural contexts are included in the curriculum. Cultural appreciation, represented in the center, is a measure of how students develop a deeper connection to their heritage as they relate to Ziyang folk songs through exploration and performance. On the left, the musical abilities highlight not only the greater mastery of techniques but also those which may only arise through repeated exposure to traditional folk vocals. Combined, these outcomes illustrate how culturally relevant pedagogy can help students grow as artists and individuals.

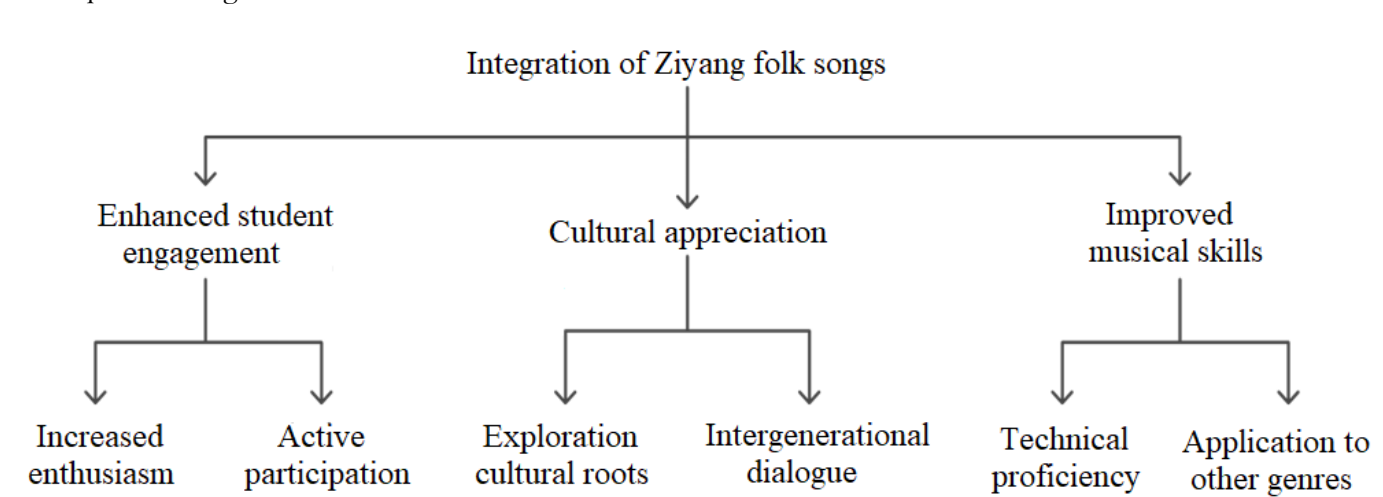


Figure 4. Integration of Ziyang folk songs in education.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study shows how important it is to introduce Ziyang folk songs into the school curriculum with educational and cultural values. This corresponds with the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, which suggests that contextualizing education within the frameworks of students’ culture is beneficial for participation and educational achievement (Guan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). The increase in student engagement seen thanks to the culturally relevant content presented in this study fits into prior research indicating that content with which students can relate instills emotion and motivates them to participate (Picado et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2023). This positive change from indifference to love for their own music demonstrates the power of music education that builds on local folk culture.

Additionally, the released results of the study with Ziyang folk songs implemented in improving musical skills were concurrent with Luo and Saihong (2023)’s research discussing the benefits of traditional music in better cognitive and technical skills. Through tackling unfamiliar musical frameworks like the Yu mode and non-functional metrical configurations, students honed their agility and grew to approach authentic Chinese musical theory. It strengthens the perception of folk music as a crossover between cultural preservation and higher music education (Eminjanovna, 2021; Oztutgan, 2020).

For cultural conservation, the results are consistent with other research indicating the function of traditional music in creating the feeling of belonging and identity among students (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Zhang & Wu, 2023). Such an increase in cultural appreciation is evident in students’ pride as they perform traditional Ziyang folk songs and their willingness to share stories with seniors, which bolsters an increasing narrative for intangible cultural heritage that music education helps drive. Furthermore, the use of experiential learning approaches, such as field visits and conversations with practitioners of folk songs, represents another way in which active involvement with cultural practices can fortify their transfer and importance (Jiayang Li & Su, 2024; Zeng & Onlamul, 2023).

Yet the study also raises challenges that can stand in the way of wider adoption of such efforts. This is due to the shortage of professionals, culturally appropriate teaching materials, and educational resources. These results are in line with Westerlund et al. (2022). However, the heart of my critique is based on Crouch et al. These gaps beg for

policy-level interventions supporting the development and integration of localized educational content. Some beneficial factors of Ziyang folk songs should be emphasized in terms of music education based on this research. It shows that integrating culture in this way deepens student engagement, grows appreciation, and nurtures critical musical skills. Hence, it covers a holistic form of teaching that helps link the education of science with cultural holdings. These findings are consistent with theoretical frameworks that call for culturally responsive pedagogy and confirm the necessity of integrating local cultural practices into the system of (formal) education (Guan et al., 2023; Reimer, 2022).

This research essentially establishes the need for national reform in education and its content that focuses heavily on culturally diverse and inclusive learning, where native music is integrated into school curricula, highlighting the importance of these native songs. It sets an example for responding to the issues of educational homogenization, as well as the need for global respect for differing cultural identities (Sakti et al., 2024; Wang & Webb, 2024).

Long-term effects of using traditional music in education, including its effects on pupils' grades, emotional state, and social skills, remain unanswered by future research. Comparative research across various regions and musical traditions may shed light on the universally relevant and context-specific features of culturally responsive music education. Additionally, exploring the preparation of teaching resources and teacher training courses based on local musical heritages can help address some of the issues that arose in this research. Lastly, consider the potential of digital platforms in preserving and sharing folk music traditions, as they can offer creative methods to work around limited resources and access a wider audience.

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